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Introduction

Ossian – Past, Present, and Future

Sebastian Mitchell

The decisions one takes in any scholarly enterprise can have unexpected consequences. The tightness of the budgets of academic publishing houses meant that Howard Gaskill was faced with a painful dilemma in the mid-1990s. His publisher, Edinburgh University Press, had been encouraging about his proposal for a new edition of the poems of Ossian, but then he discovered what they intended was a historical-critical edition with a limited print run, and to be sold at between £70.00 and £80.00. Nobody in their right mind could look upon academic publishing as a means to personal enrichment, but as Gaskill realised the prospects of the edition at that price were not encouraging. With such a high price tag, it would be only academic libraries and the most dedicated of Ossianists who would be prepared to buy it; and meagre sales would represent a defeat of one of the project's central aims, to enable the strange and beautiful poems to reach a wider readership. When EUP learnt that he was considering his options they offered him a deal, that if he were prepared to produce camera-ready copy, they could sell the book for less than £20.00; an offer he duly accepted. It's a standard piece of economic wisdom that if you lower the price of goods, then you should be able to sell more of them, and hence there was now a reasonable expectation that Gaskill's edition of *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works* (1996), with its introduction by Fiona Stafford, would prove more attractive to potential purchasers. Nevertheless, the publishers were still astonished that an edition of not-very-well-known-eighteenth-century translations of ancient Gaelic verse of dubious provenance could sell out its initial print run within the year. It would then go through two reprints by the beginning of the twenty-first century.¹ The popularity and success of Gaskill's edition cannot, of course, be explained merely by an expedient reduction in unit cost; and its healthy sales suggest two other things: that there was a rejuvenation of academic interest in Ossian as both literary corpus and cultural phenomenon at the end of the last century; and that the contemporary appeal of the poetry reached well beyond conventional academic study.

¹ Howard Gaskill provided details of the development of his edition of Ossian in the course of an interview conducted by me in Edinburgh, 9 July 2015. He also discusses how his interest in the poetry arose in his 'Why "Ossian"?', in Gerald Bär and Howard Gaskill (eds.), *Ossian and National Epic* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2012), p.17–22.

The purpose of this forum issue of the *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* is to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the publication of the *Poems of Ossian*, and to acknowledge the significant contribution to Ossianic studies by Howard Gaskill and Fiona Stafford. Looking back, the appearance of the edition seems to have occurred at a pivotal moment in the academic response to the bard, both as a summation of the first phase of an Ossianic scholarly renaissance which ran from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s; and at the beginning of a second phase, which has run from the mid-1990s to the present day. This issue is comprised of six articles, which provide a significant extension of the major themes of modern Ossianic study established in the late twentieth century; and they collectively demonstrate a recent shift in the general perception of the canonical status of these works. But before considering the articles themselves, we should perhaps establish some of the reasons why one might regard Gaskill's edition of the poetry as a new and distinctive work; and why it proved so popular, and, indeed, culturally relevant in the final years of the twentieth century. At the time of the publication of *The Poems of Ossian*, there had been no new edition of the poems produced by a British or American publisher since 1926. Still, it wasn't *that* difficult for the enthusiast to lay one's hands on a second-hand copy of the poetry, as editions had been produced regularly throughout the nineteenth century, and there were some early twentieth-century collections as well, often reprints of the Victorian ones.² The novelty and distinctiveness of the Gaskill edition was in its compilation and selection of copy text.

The three standard works of Ossianic literature are the pamphlet-sized promissory *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* (1760), the first full-length epic and accompanying poems, *Fingal* (1762 [1761]), and the second epic with further poems, *Temora* (1763). The *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* and *Fingal* were both published anonymously, with Macpherson only formally acknowledged as the translator of all the ancient Celtic poetry with the appearance of *Temora*. The first combined edition supervised by Macpherson was the two-volume *The Works of Ossian* (1765). This edition substantially reproduced the texts, annotation, and paratextual materials of the *Fingal* and *Temora* volumes; and it added the seminal work of Ossianic analysis of the period, Hugh Blair's *Dissertation on the Works of Ossian* (1763). In the early 1770s, at the same time as Macpherson was working on his translation of the *Iliad*, he produced his significantly revised edition of the poetry, now retitled as *The Poems of Ossian* (1773 [1774]), and puffed on its title sheet as offering 'greatly improved' versions of the translations. Macpherson reordered the poems into what he now believed was their

² The standard bibliography for editions of Ossian in English published in the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century remains George F. Black, *Macpherson's Ossian and the Ossianic Controversy: A Contribution Towards a Bibliography* (New York: New York Public Library, 1926); see also John J. Dunn, 'Macpherson's Ossian and the Ossianic Controversy: A Supplementary Bibliography', *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, 75 (1971), p.465–73.

correct chronological sequence; and he pruned the annotation, dispensing with all the classical allusions and illustrative parallel passages from the notes of *Fingal*. The revisions to the poems themselves were significant. Macpherson adjusted the phrasing and syntax; he discarded the distinctive long dashes, which had been used as connectives in the earlier versions; enclosed reported speech in quotation marks; reduced the number of commas; increased the number of full stops; lengthened the paragraphs; and shifted the tenses of some of the verbs. There were, no doubt, some good commercial reasons for making these changes. Macpherson and his publishers could expect with effective marketing to sell copies of the revised texts not only to new readers, but also to enthusiastic owners of the earlier versions, who might be persuaded to buy the book to see just how different Ossian was in his new incarnation. It seems equally probable that Macpherson was on some level responding to the adverse comments on the style of the translations, endeavouring to render the bard's epic, lyrics and dramatic works into a more fashionable sentimental idiom. And given that the *Poems of Ossian* was the last edition with which Macpherson had any direct involvement, it is not surprising that nearly every subsequent edition of the poems has been based on this revised text.

Gaskill decided for his edition to adopt the 1765 *Works of Ossian* as his copy text, rather than the revised version of the 1770s. As he suggests, it was the early editions of the poems, rather than their subsequent reformulations, which had such an impact both in Great Britain and on continental Europe. When eighteenth-century critics examined the poetry, or when painters visualised its striking episodes, or when poets sought inspiration from the works, producing their pastiches in sublime style, more often than not, they had in mind the versions of the 1760s, rather than those of the 1770s.³ Even if one were not entirely persuaded by Gaskill's theory on the psychological motivation for Macpherson's revisions, that he was an 'epigone', who by the 1770s had become 'jealous' of the bard's creative genius, no longer content to be regarded merely as the translator, then Gaskill's observations on the aesthetic qualities of the earlier versions, when compared to the later ones, are still indisputable. The versions of poems from the 1760s are, bluntly, just that much better than those from 1773.⁴ Macpherson's attempt to polish up his translations had the unfortunate effect of dissipating much of the poetry's sublime grandeur. Its sonorous cadences gave way to a stop-start-stop pattern of syncopation. And if one were to lift one's gaze beyond the narrow confines of Anglophone culture and scholarship, then the only versions worth looking at

³ For contemporary creative responses to Ossian in Britain, see Dafydd Moore, 'General Introduction', *Ossian and Ossianism*, ed. Dafydd Moore, 4 vols (London: Routledge, 2004), I, p.xciv–cx.

⁴ Howard Gaskill, 'About this Edition', in James Macpherson, *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works*, ed. by Gaskill (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), p.xxiv.

were those of the early 1760s, because they were the ones which had such a profound influence on continental Europe; they were the *textus receptus* from which early German, Italian, and French translators produced their own influential versions. It was from these early English texts that Goethe selected and translated passages into German, and then inserted the extracts at key points in his *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (1774) [*The Sorrows of Young Werther*], his novel of stifling social constraint, thwarted passion, and bungled self-destruction, which would secure his international reputation.⁵

Gaskill's edition, then, represented the first modern scholarly edition of the poetry in its most compelling and significant form. It recorded significant variants from the earlier version of the poetry and from 1773 (the selective criteria was whether the changes would show up in translation). It reprinted all of Macpherson's annotations, and all relevant prefatory materials, as well as Blair's *Dissertation*. For the first time since Malcolm Laing's debunking edition of the poems of 1805, the early *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* were also included. And one interesting irony of its appearance, which Gaskill's own commentary noted, is the *Fragments'* semi-detached relationship to the rest of the canon, such that 'Ossian' appears in this initial work as 'Oscian'; and he is only one of the principal personages in the poems, rather than the masterful orchestrating presence of the later epics. Gaskill's notes alongside his descriptive index (as a combination of glossary and register of names) also enabled the modern reader to navigate his or her way through the misty obfuscation of the poem's action and bewildering cast of characters. One could finally see, for example, that the Oscar of the *Fragments* was not, in fact, the same Oscar, the son of Ossian, of the later poems; or rather more accurately he *was* Ossian's son, but had been subsequently transferred to a different father for the sake of narrational consistency. One could now identify the nameless grieving maiden who demands a tomb for her fallen lover in 'Fragment X' of the *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* as Colma, the lover of Salgar, in the affecting later lyric, 'Songs of Selma'. The geography and topography of the poetry also became that much clearer. The main action of the epics takes place almost exclusively in Ulster; there are references throughout to episodes in the Western Highlands (as the Kingdom of Fingal); and other scenes are set in a great archipelagic arc, sweeping northwards from the Hebrides, passing through the Orkney and Shetland isles, and round to the Jutland Peninsula in Scandinavia.

Yet, as I've already suggested, one should probably not regard Gaskill's edition as a sudden Ossianic epiphany, emerging out of scholarly darkness, but rather as the culmination, the ziggurat, of an initial phase of steadily accumulating interest in the poetry. It would be an overstatement to claim

⁵ For a full account of Gaskill's views on the continental impact of the 1765 edition of the poetry, see his 'Ossian in Europe', *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 21 (1994), p.644–78.

that Ossianic studies by the early 1980s had the appearance of a desolate plain; but interest in the poetry was certainly minimal. There had been important discussions of the poetry in the second half of the twentieth century. In the early 1950s, the Gaelic scholar, Derick Thomson, for example, had followed up on the investigations of the *Report of the Highland Committee of Scotland Appointed to Inquire into the Nature and Authenticity of the Poems of Ossian* (1805). He broadly agreed with the committee's findings that Macpherson had incorporated a considerable amount of authentic Gaelic ballad material in the Ossianic corpus, with the translator supplementing and moulding the material when he detected absences and expressive deficiencies in his mainly oral sources (Thomson surmises that there is a substantial amount of authentic ballad verse in *Fingal*, but almost none in *Temora*).⁶ In the 1960s, Henry Okun produced a seminal account of the influence of Ossian on art; examining, in particular, the works of European Romantic artists, such as Abildgaard, Runge, Ingres, and Girodet. In the 1970s, Margaret Rubel approached the poetry from the perspective of intellectual history, and examined its influence on the development of Scottish staidal historiography; and in the mid-1980s, the historian Richard Sher offered a revisionist account of Macpherson and the origins of the Ossian poems. Sher highlighted the pressures which Macpherson as a young tutor from Inverness-shire was under from the urban elite to come up with these ancient artefacts; and the general need of the Scottish literati themselves to find some noble form of cultural expression to offset their growing sense of national marginalisation and indignation.⁷

Nevertheless, such instances of Ossianic discussion did little to dent the post-war consensus that the poetry lacked intrinsic merit; and that it should be treated as little more than a curiosity; part of that quaint if perplexing eighteenth-century vogue for literary forgery. Even in those modern publications where one might expect the poetry to receive a favourable airing, the response could be surprisingly circumspect. An ostensible purpose of the four-volume *The History of Scottish Literature* (1987–1988) was to establish an approved canon of Scottish imaginative writing from the middle ages to the modern day. The second of the four volumes, covering the period 1660–1800, has a brief discussion of the poetry, limited to an account of its influence on the development of European Romanticism. The implication of this terse piece would seem to be that it was permissible to celebrate Ossian as a continental catalyst for a new style of artistic expressiveness, but one still

⁶ See Derick S. Thomson, *The Gaelic Sources of Macpherson's 'Ossian'* (London: Oliver & Boyd, 1952), and Derick S. Thomson, 'Bogus Gaelic Literature c.1750–c.1820', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Glasgow*, 5 (1958), p.172–88. See also Donald T. Mackintosh, 'James Macpherson and the Book of the Dean of Lismore', *Scottish Gaelic Studies*, 6 (1949), p.11–20.

⁷ See respectively Henry Okun, 'Ossian in Painting', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 30 (1967), p.327–56, Margaret Rubel, *Savage and Barbarian: Historical Attitudes in the Criticism of Homer and Ossian in Britain, 1760–1800* (Amsterdam: North Holland Publishing, 1978), p.39–75; and Richard B. Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Moderate Literati of Edinburgh* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1985), p.242–61.

shouldn't delve too deeply into the nature of the works themselves, for fear of uncovering some nationally embarrassing entanglement of the authentic and the bogus; much better to play safe – to treat paradoxical Ossian as a hollowed-out cultural phenomenon, dubious in itself, but still capable of making a significant mark overseas.⁸

In the early 1980s, Howard Gaskill was browsing in a second-hand book sale in the basement of the David Hume Tower on George Square in Edinburgh (he was a Senior Lecturer in the German Department at the University of Edinburgh at the time). He happened upon a copy of Macpherson's 1765 *Works of Ossian*. Leafing through its pages, he found himself momentarily hauled backwards through some kind of Proustian analepsis to his initial encounter with the bard. Some twenty-five years earlier, as a teenager, he had come across a copy of the *Sorrows of Young Werther* in its original German (a language he was studying) in Preston Public Library. As he read Goethe's novel, he found himself beguiled by these pieces of poetry in 'measured prose', which so entranced the novel's protagonist. By the early 1980s, he was aware, of course, that Herder acted as a significant conduit for Ossian into German literary culture; and that the Romantic poet, Friedrich Hölderlin – the subject of his doctorate and early research – had been an admirer of the ancient warrior bard. In Ossian's poems, Gaskill began to see a means of exploring Scottish-German literary relations from a distinctive Celtic perspective.⁹

Gaskill's initial Ossianic foray was an article "'Ossian" Macpherson: Towards a Rehabilitation', published in *Comparative Criticism* in 1986. This essay has many hallmarks of his mature academic style; there is the representative scholarly exactness, with an impressive breadth of comparative literary reference; and there was the linguist's aptitude for the forensic examination of texts at the level of phrase and sentence. Yet, the disinterested analysis was also typically placed in the service of a more polemical agenda. In an assured and redolent style, Gaskill challenged the persistent claim of a Johnsonian-derived criticism, which regarded Ossian as not just some quaint literary dissembling, but as an entirely meretricious undertaking, self-evidently a work of deceitful fabrication, a fraud perpetrated in the spirit of a bogus nationalism, and as a cynical means of self-advancement for its ambitious and mendacious 'translator'.¹⁰ This case, Gaskill believed, was

⁸ See Andrew Hook, 'Scotland and Romanticism: The International Scene', in Andrew Hook (ed.), *The History of Scottish Literature, Volume 2 1660–1800* (Aberdeen University Press, 1987), p.313–16.

⁹ Interview conducted with Gaskill, 9 July 2015. See also Gaskill, 'Why Ossian?', p17–18.

¹⁰ See Howard Gaskill, "'Ossian" Macpherson: Towards a Rehabilitation', *Comparative Criticism: A Yearbook*, 8 (1986), p.113–48. Gaskill considers Ian Haywood's account of Ossianic 'fraud' in his 'The Making of History', *Literature and History*, 9 (1983), p.139–51 (subsequently revised as *The Making of History: A Study of the Literary Forgeries of James Macpherson and Thomas Chatterton* (London: Associated University Press, 1987)). However, the main target of Gaskill's disapproval in this essay is Hugh Trevor-Roper. See Trevor-Roper, 'The Ossianic Forgeries: Wrong but Romantic', *The Spectator*, 16 March 1985, p.14–15, and 'The Invention of Tradition: The Highland Tradition of Scotland', in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Granger (eds.), *The Invention of*

founded on two facile errors – that the notion of literary merit could be simply boiled down to a matter of provenance; and that the issues of authenticity and translation could be constructed in crude opposition to those of originality and transmission. The main reason that many European artists and writers were impressed and moved by these works, and continued to be impressed and moved by them, was not because they were hopeless dupes, airily imagining themselves to be ancient warriors striding through some grand monochromatic landscape, blissfully unaware of the serious questions of authenticity and truthfulness which the poetry raised; no, they appreciated the poems, because they were particularly attuned to the various improvisations and adjustments always required in the demanding task of converting poetry from one language to another; and because they were also prepared to make judgments on the aesthetic attributes of a given text, irrespective of its supposed provenance.

At roughly the same time as Gaskill was examining Ossian in terms of its Scottish-German connections, Fiona Stafford was embarking on a postgraduate programme of study on Romanticism at Oxford. She recalls that in the course of her studies she kept coming across references to Ossian in the works of the major Romantic poets; and having read William Hazlitt's 'On Poetry in General' in his *Lectures on the English Poets* (1818), she began to think there must have been something more to this Ossian than just lightweight forgery. The more she read the poetry and critical literature, the more perplexing it all seemed to be, as she wondered what had Macpherson actually been up to, and did he even possess any Gaelic. She also felt a personal sense of contact, realising how tender an age the translator had been when he published the *Fragments* ('not much older than me, and younger than many graduate students').¹¹ She then embarked on a D.Phil. on Ossian, examining Macpherson's background, his formative years, the cultural circumstances of the Highlands in the middle of the eighteenth century, the arts curriculum at the University of Aberdeen, the progress of the Edinburgh Enlightenment, and the immediate reception of the poems. She also undertook a fair amount of field work, meeting the Clan Chief, Sir William Macpherson of Cluny in London, and visiting Balavil (Macpherson's estate in Inverness-shire), 'following in the footsteps of Macpherson too', she says, 'to get a sense of the terrain'. The thesis was subsequently revised for her study, *The Sublime Savage: A Study of James Macpherson and the Poems of Ossian* (1988). The book provided the first modern biographical critical account of Macpherson which was broadly sympathetic to its

Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). Trevor-Roper's arguments appear in a revised and expanded form in his posthumous *The Invention of Scotland: Myth and History* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2008), p.106–190. Johnson's critique of Macpherson has its modern proponents, see Clement Hawes, *The British Eighteenth Century and Global Critique* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), and Thomas M. Curley, *Samuel Johnson, the Ossian Fraud, and the Celtic Revival in Great Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹¹ Fiona Stafford to Sebastian Mitchell, email, 24 July 2015, in response to a number of questions sent by me. Subsequent discussion of Stafford's developing interest in Ossian derives from this source.

subject; it judiciously considered the works in terms of the intellectual training Macpherson received in Aberdeen; it applied the disinterested tenets of close textual analysis to the poetry; and it opened up the possibility of a revisionist approach to Ossian, that the set of epics, lyrics, and dramatic pieces might possibly possess artistic merit for precisely those reasons for which they had been previously derided, as an original conflation of the ancient and modern, and of the authentic and inauthentic.¹²

Howard recalls that he first found out about Fiona's work through Ronald Black, sometime curator of Gaelic manuscripts at the National Library of Scotland, in 1985. Fiona recalls that Howard took her out to lunch in Edinburgh, to discuss 'Ossian, German responses and the whole question of Macpherson's materials and practices'. 'We got on very well', she remembers, 'and I was surprised to meet someone who was working on Ossian, because no-one in Oxford seemed to know very much about it'. Their first academic collaboration was Gaskill's edited collection, *Ossian Revisited* (1991), for which Stafford provide editorial assistance and contributed an essay on Wordsworth's ambivalent response to the Ossianic corpus. The volume was notable for being part of Gaskill's wider agenda to foster scholarly debate on Macpherson. There were contributions from, among others, Donald Meek, extending Thomson's discussions of the Gaelic ballad origins of the poems; Steve Rizza, who challenged the received opinion that Blair's *Dissertation* should be summarily dismissed as a 'bulky and foolish treatise'; and David Raynor, who explored the relationship of Macpherson and David Hume (starting well, but ending in mutual prickliness).¹³ In 1996, Stafford organised a bicentenary conference on Macpherson in Oxford, which also served as the publication launch for the *Poems of Ossian*; and Stafford and Gaskill co-edited a further volume, *From Gaelic to Romantic: Ossianic Translations* (1998), arising from the papers delivered at this event. As an academic collaboration, their relationship had an interesting dynamic, with Gaskill's tendency to polemic in his essays (not his editorial work), with his fondness for the cut and thrust of scholarly dispute complemented by Stafford's more measured approach to academic discussion.

Yet, as *From Gaelic to Romantic* partially acknowledges, the general context of the investigation of the Celtic bard was already changing by the 1990s; a generation of academics who were conversant with the conceptual approaches to literary study had started to write about Macpherson and the translations. There were discussions of the poems drawing on feminist theory, the tenets of New

¹² Paul J. deGateno's more conventional though still useful literary biography of Macpherson appeared the following year. See deGateno James Macpherson (Boston: Twayne, 1989).

¹³ See Fiona J. Stafford, "'Dangerous Success": Ossian, Wordsworth, and English', in Howard Gaskill (ed.), *Ossian Revisited* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), p.49–72; and in the same volume, Donald E. Meek, 'The Gaelic Ballads of Scotland: Creativity and Adaptation', p.19–48; Steve Rizza, 'A Bulky and Foolish Treatise? Hugh Blair's "Critical Dissertation" Reconsidered', p.129–46; and David Raynor, 'Ossian and Hume', p.147–63.

Historicism and Edward Said's Post-Colonialism.¹⁴ Interest in Ossian at the turn of the twenty-first century was also undoubtedly spurred by the changing political alignments in the United Kingdom; with an increasingly confident nationalist movement in Scotland; and the establishment of a devolved parliament in Edinburgh in 1999.¹⁵ Ossian, as a significant episode in fraught Anglo-Scottish relations, seemed to offer a suitably intriguing pre-history to the current shifting circumstances. Murray Pittock highlighted the use of Jacobite imagery and symbolism in Macpherson's translations. As such, he suggested the poetry should be conceived as part of the general scheme of Jacobite iconography, providing an oppositional discourse to Hanoverian hegemony in Scotland after the vanquishing of the Young Pretender at Culloden in 1746.¹⁶ Other critics have indicated the ways in which the poems problematize national distinctions as much as they affirm them; and they have preferred to interpret the works as part of an encompassing British culture, rather than as the exclusive property of a dissenting Scottish one.¹⁷ The reception, transformation, and even the transfiguration of the poems have continued to be significant aspect of Ossianic scholarship. In the context of Irish, rather than Scottish or British studies, the historian Clare O'Halloran, in an influential account of an earlier episode of generational shift in critical sensibilities, showed how older Irish cultural commentators in the 1760s were inclined to dismiss Macpherson's translations as corrupt and barbaric nonsense, while their younger counterparts, better attuned to current literary taste, gave the poems a more favourable hearing.¹⁸ The Canadian scholar, Katie Trumpener, demonstrated how Ossianic primitivism suffused much of the landscape of British narrative fiction in

¹⁴ See representatively Adam Potkay, 'Virtue and Manners in Macpherson's Poems of Ossian', *PMLA*, 107 (1992), p.120–31, Liza Kozłowski, 'Terrible Women and Tender Men: A Study of Gender in Macpherson's Ossian', in Stafford and Gaskill (eds.), *From Gaelic to Romantic: Ossianic Translations* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), p.119–135, and Sebastian Mitchell, 'James Macpherson's *Ossian* and the Empire of Sentiment', *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 22 (1999), p.155–72; and see also Stafford's extension of Ossianic terminal imagery into a wider conceptual study of literary anthropology in her *The Last of the Race: A Growth of a Myth from Milton to Darwin* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994).

¹⁵ For an argument of this kind, see Gauti Kristmannsson's *Literary Diplomacy: I The Role of Translation in the Construction of National Literatures in Britain and Germany 1750–1830, II Translation without an Original*, 2 vols (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2005).

¹⁶ See Murray G.H. Pittock, *Poetry and Jacobite Politics in Eighteenth-Century Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p.178–86, and Pittock 'James Macpherson and the Jacobite Code', in Fiona Stafford and Howard Gaskill (eds.), *From Gaelic to Romantic: Ossianic Translations* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), p.41–50. See also Pittock's subsequent examination of Ossian as a challenge to Anglo-centric Romantic Criticism, in his *Scottish and Irish Romanticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.71–81.

¹⁷ See Leith Davis, *Acts of Union: Scotland and the Literary Negotiation of the British Nation, 1707–1830* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p.77–106; Susan Manning, *Fragments of Union: Making Connections in Scottish and American Writing* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), p. 19 passim; Juliet Shields, *Sentimental Literature and Anglo-Scottish Identity, 1745–1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p.18 passim; and Sebastian Mitchell, *Visions of Britain, 1730–1830: Anglo-Scottish Writing and Representation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p.122–54.

¹⁸ Clare O'Halloran, 'Irish Re-Creations of the Gaelic Past: The Challenge of Macpherson's Ossian', *Past and Present*, 124 (1989), p.69–95. See also Mícheál Mac Craith, "'We know all these poems': The Irish Response to Ossian' in Howard Gaskill (ed.), *The Reception of Ossian in Europe* (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2004), p.91–108.

the Romantic period; and Gaskill himself edited in the first decade of this century a compendious collection on continental Ossian, with accounts of how the poetry's influence stretched as far as Portugal in the West and beyond the Urals to the East.¹⁹ He also commissioned for this volume important chapters on the influence of Ossian on music, especially Romantic lieder, and a survey of Ossian and art; the first substantial account of Ossianic visual culture in English since Okun's article in the 1960s.²⁰

It was also in the realm of contemporary visual art that Gaskill's *Poems of Ossian* made a significant impression. In 1997, a friend of the distinguished photographic artist, Calum Colvin, gave him a copy of Robert Crawford's review of the edition in the *London Review of Books*.²¹ Colvin recognised that the poems and their commentary provided the possibility of a visual examination of the complexities and contradictions inherent in modern nationalism.²² By the beginning of this century, Colvin had decided to focus his Ossian project on the first text in the Gaskill edition, *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*. The result was his *Ossian: Fragments of Ancient Poetry*, first exhibited to great acclaim at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery in 2002. The show featured twenty-five large-scale colour photographs, varnished to look like oil paintings. The striking opening sequence has an image of the mournful bard projected onto some Celtic ruins, which then progressively fades from view. The distinctive postmodern components of this exhibition with its meditation on the fragment, and the authentic and fake were, if anything, more pronounced in Colvin's subsequently collaboration with the contemporary poet, Tom Leonard. Colvin produced stark photogravure prints after his Ossian images; and Leonard produced a series of vividly coloured silkscreen prints in response to them. Colvin is only the most prominent of a number of artists, who have looked to Ossian as a source of inspiration since the end of the last century. In the same year as the publication of Gaskill's edition, Geoff MacEwan created a sequence of small abstract copper-plate prints, which were interleaved into a 1796 duodecimo edition of the poems (thereby creating a pastiche period work in postmodern style); the conceptual artist, Gayle Chong Kwan, used Ossianic images and locations in her exhibition the *Obsidian Isle*; and the distinguished sculptor, Alexander Stoddart, has adopted a fiercely anti-modernist stance in his depictions of Ossian and episodes from the poems. From the mid-1990s, he has sculpted charismatic busts of the wild-haired sightless Celtic bard in bronze of

¹⁹ See Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), especially p.67–127.

²⁰ See Christopher Smith, 'Ossian in Music' and Murdo Macdonald 'Ossian and Art: Scotland into Europe via Rome', both in *The Reception of Ossian in Europe*, p.375–92, and p.393–404 respectively.

²¹ See Robert Crawford, 'Post-Cullodenism', *London Review of Books*, 3 October 1996, p.18.

²² Calum Colvin recalls the genesis of the *Ossian: Fragments of Ancient Poetry* exhibition in his 'Ossian – An Epic Visual Journey', in *Ossian and the National Epic*, p.292–3.

Miltonic darkness; and he has a long-cherished plan to carve the monumental figure of a recumbent dead Oscar from the landscape of the West of Scotland.²³

It has never been openly declared as such, but the general deconstructive insight that annotation obfuscates and undermines the main work, as much as it illuminates and stabilises it, can be readily applied to the extensive textual apparatus of Ossian. The ambivalent relationship of footnotes to poetry is a central consideration of Dafydd Moore's opening article in this forum issue.²⁴ Moore is now one of the leading authorities on Ossian. He was postgraduate student at the University of Edinburgh in the mid-1990s. He remembers that Gaskill was supportive of his studies, happy to impart wisdom without appointment. You could always tell when he was in residence, Moore recalls, as the aromatic twang of the smoke from his pipe struck you as soon as the elevator doors opened onto the tenth floor of the David Hume Tower. Moore produced an important monograph on the formalist and generic aspects of the Ossianic corpus in the early years of this century; as well as his four-volume collection of Ossianic works and their early reception, *Ossian and Ossianism* (2004).²⁵ In this essay, he extends his work on annotation, form and genre to encourage us to reconsider the standard categorisation of the longer Ossian poems; to approach them through the expectations of classical Attic tragedy, rather than through those of primary epic.

Ossianic annotation is also of importance to Nigel Leask in his contribution to this issue. Leask wrote the seminal modern account of the pastoralism of Robert Burns' poetry, in which the particularity of place for the Ayrshire poet is subjected to extended and exacting analysis.²⁶ It is the Ossianic landscape of the Scottish Highlands, which is the principal topic of his essay here. Two purposes of Macpherson's notes were to identify the poems' dramatic locations, and to explain the etymology of the Gaelic place names. In his 'Fingalian Topographies: Ossian and the Highland Tour, 1760–1805', Leask challenges the notion that the Bard and his works supplied a literary pretext for the economic improvement and clearances of the Highlands. Instead, he argues, the poems provide 'a focus for cultural resistance to modernisation, and a rallying cry for Gaelic language and culture'. In the course of his alternative national narrative, Leask reveals the accidental nature of some Ossianic

²³ For discussion of depictions of Ossian from the late twentieth-century onwards see Macdonald, 'Ossian and Art', p.403–4, and Sebastian Mitchell, 'Celtic Postmodernism: Ossian and Contemporary Art', *Translation and Literature*, 22 (2013), p.401–35.

²⁴ The relationship of the footnote to the text of Ossian as a nexus of the scholarly and primitive has been considered by Robert Crawford in his *The Modern Poet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 53. See also Moore's earlier observations on the ironic glossing effect of Macpherson's annotation in his "'As Flies the Unconstant Sun": Tradition, Memory and Cultural Transmission in *The Poems of Ossian*', *Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, 23 (2008), p.76–93.

²⁵ See Dafydd Moore, *Enlightenment and Romance in James Macpherson's The Poems of Ossian: Myth, Genre, and Cultural Change* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003)

²⁶ Nigel Leask, *Robert Burns and Pastoral: Poetry and Improvement in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

nominations; he recounts the ways in which the bardic sublime often teeters on the edge of the absurd; and he uncovers a nineteenth-century plan for an Ossian landscape installation, which looks like a precursor to Stoddart's scheme for a gigantic subterranean Oscar. In her contribution to the issue, Victoria Henshaw is interested in the network of Gaelic collectors covering the Highlands in the middle and later part of the eighteenth century. A historian by training (she has written about the British army against the background of the Jacobite rebellions), she examines here the relationships and methods of these Gaelic collectors and translators.²⁷ Drawing extensively on previously under-researched archival records of their correspondence, Henshaw explores the extent to which these men attempted to arrive at a common approach to the business of collecting and translating. She mounts a forthright defence to Trevor-Roper's accusation that these translators effectively acted as a cabal; engaged in the same mendacious enterprise of fabricating a mythological Celtic past for the purposes of modern consumption and profit.

In her 'Reviving Ossian's Female Corpses: Mourners and Warriors in The Poems of Ossian', Juliet Shields examines the role of women in the poems. She takes issue with Adam Potkay's influential discussion of the poetry from the 1990s, in which he suggested that the female characters are habitually dispatched, as a kind of symbolic declaration of their redundancy in this Celtic twilight world. Male warriors, Potkay suggests, have so effectively assimilated the feminine passions of sentiment and sympathy, that there is no longer any proper social and cultural function left for the women to perform. Instead, Shields argues that women *do* play significant parts in the poems, appearing throughout as warriors, mourners, and bards. Through a proper consideration of their depiction, we can now recognise the extent to which female figures continue to bear the traditional burden of national representation. And in their roles as mourners, she says, 'Ossian's women participate in what is arguably the foremost concern of the corpus of the poetry as a whole – the memorialisation of a seemingly irrevocably doomed heroic culture'. Gerald Bär, who has written extensively on the reception of Ossian in the Iberian Peninsula, considers here that generative Ossianic text for Gaskell, Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* (and a source of continuing interest, the novel is the subject of his most recent Ossian publication).²⁸ Bär describes the fate of the *Werther's* Ossian passages in the novel's English, French, Spanish and Portuguese translations. He takes an original approach to *Werther's* transmission, by concentrating on the ways in which the extracts are

²⁷ See Victoria Henshaw, *Scotland and the British Army, 1700–1750* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

²⁸ See, for example, Gerald Bär's 'Ossian in Portugal', in *The Reception of Ossian in Europe*, p.351–74; his edition of Portuguese translations of Ossian, *Poesias de Ossian: Antologia das traduções em português* (Lisbon: Universidade Católica Editora, 2010); and his "'Ossian fürs Frauenzimmer'? Lengefeld, Günderrode, and the Portuguese Translation of 'Alcipe' and Adelaide Prata', *Translation and Literature*, 22 (2013), p.343–60. Howard Gaskell's most recent Ossian piece is "'Arise, O magnificent effulgence of Ossian's soul!": Werther the Translator in the English Tradition, *Translation and Literature*, 22 (2013), p.302–21.

rendered in its various translations. Sometimes they're well translated, but often not. Sometimes the extracts are fully present; sometimes they're partially present; and sometimes they're not there at all. Nevertheless, Goethe's *Werther*, as Bär points out, is still responsible by any reputable statistical indices for more Europeans having encountered Ossian than any other work, including the poems themselves.

Gaskill's *Reception of Ossian in Europe* memorably concluded with Murdo Macdonald's chapter on Ossian and art. And Macdonald also provides the closing contribution to this collection. In his article here, 'Ossian and Visual Art – Mislaid and Rediscovered', Macdonald discusses his own recent discovery of an Ossian painting by J. M. W. Turner in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge. He shows how this painting can be considered to be pivotal in the development of Turner's landscape style. He also traces a parallel Ossianic visual narrative by way of the transmission and the development of a key image of the Celtic bard (originally painted by the Scottish artist Alexander Runciman) through the frontispieces of a series of Italian and French translations of the poems; and he concludes with some salient observations on the importance of Ossianic imagery for the Celtic Revival of the 1890s. As with Gaskill's writing, there is a polemical snap to Macdonald's scholarship, a desire to confront through academic criticism some deficiencies in the art-historical reception of the poems; and to agitate in this essay and elsewhere for a large-scale exhibition of Ossianic art; which would be the first significant retrospective on the bard and his works since *Ossian und die Kunst um 1800* [*Ossian in Art around 1800*] was held in Paris and Hamburg in 1974.

The contributions to this issue attest to the vibrancy of Ossianic scholarship some twenty years after the publication of *The Poems of Ossian*; and if any further proof were needed, they confirm the significance of the poetry as a cultural phenomenon that addresses contemporary concerns about national allegiance and sexual politics. The shifting nature of the political settlement of the United Kingdom, with the defeat of the 'Yes' vote for independence in Scotland in 2014, and the return fifty-six MPs from the SNP (Scottish National Party) to the Westminster Parliament in the General Election in 2015 seems certain to keep the national aspects of the poetry of Ossian topical for quite some time to come, either as evidence of the fault-line in the cultural relations between Scotland and England, or as a satisfactory amalgamation of Scottish sublimity and English sensibility (depending on your point of view). One thing, however, does seem to be firmly established, and it's a major critical shift which these essays affirm, that by the second decade of the twenty-first century the literary status of the poems is much more assured than in the 1980s. The peripheral standing of the works in 1987 was indicated by their treatment in the final chapter of *The History of Scottish Literature 1667–1800*, as a faintly embarrassing source of continental Romantic enthusiasm. By 2013, James Mulholland was able to take for granted the canonical status of the *Poems of Ossian* in

his study of orality and empire, *Sounding Imperial: Poetic Voice and the Politics of Empire, 1730–1820*. An increasing number of undergraduate courses include the work on their syllabuses; and it is nigh on impossible now to conceive of a prospective history of eighteenth-century Scottish literature without a full account of the works of the ancient warrior bard.

Edmund Burke's declamation that 'you can never plan the future from the past' is a hoary if plausible aphorism; and while we cannot be certain as to the long-term fate of Ossianic scholarship, there are a number of current and forthcoming projects, which can be noted here; and we can conjecture as to possible developments.²⁹ Eric Gidal's original study of the ecological and geological inheritance of the poetry, *Ossianic Unconformities Bardic Poetry in the Industrial Age*, was published in the summer of 2015; the *International Companion to James Macpherson*, edited by Dafydd Moore, is forthcoming; a young scholar is currently at work on a monograph on Macpherson as historian; and the National University of Ireland, Galway is producing an online edition of the poems.³⁰ It is also possible to indicate some gaps in our understanding of the poetry's influence; there is not much scholarship on the poems' dramatic reception and adaptation; and while a good number of Ossian-inspired musical works have come to light in the last decade (with modern pieces by Schoenberg and James Macmillan), there is no recent conspectus to make sense of them.³¹

In a more speculative vein, contemporary artists have been extraordinarily effective in matching up the distinctive aspects of the fragment, pastiche, and the 'authentic' in the poetry to the abiding concerns of postmodernism; but one might still reflect on how the poetry's striking concentric configurations of space and time conform to eighteenth-century theories of special-temporal aesthetics, such as those of offered by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. One way or another, Macpherson, as translator and fabricator, had to struggle with the transition of poetry from an oral state into a fixed textual form. Over the last two decades Humanities scholars have, of course, undergone a radical transformation in the medium of their own working practices, from papers and books to the virtual environment of the digital age. One can imagine the future Ossian scholar viewing facsimiles of the poems, freely suspended in space in front of him or her, as though the poems were displayed as sharply illuminated overlapping panels, to be positioned, turned, and scaled by vertical, horizontal and radial movement of the hand. Yet, it is not an unreasonable assumption, even in this shining future world of holographic scholarship, that the student of Ossian, when he or she needs to trace

²⁹ Edmund Burke, *A Letter from Mr. Burke, to a Member of the National Assembly; in Answer to Some Objections to his Book on French Affairs*, 3rd edn (London: Dodsley, 1791), p.73.

³⁰ Kristen Lindfield-Ott, *Macpherson the Historian: Historiography, Nation-building, and Enlightenment Culture*, scheduled for publication in 2018 by Edinburgh University Press; Ossian Online (<http://ossianonline.org>), convened by Rebecca Barr, David Kelly, and Justin Tonra.

³¹ See James Porter, 'Ossian', *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, Oxford University Press, consulted 27 Aug. 2015 <<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/47070>>.

the complex genealogies of warriors, bards, and maidens; or to check the etymology of the topographical features of the landscape; or to compare textual variants in the different versions of *Fingal*, *Temora* and the other poems, then he or she will still be reaching across the desk, or console, to consult a print copy of Gaskill's *Poems of Ossian*.